

Coconut

What is the size of a soccer ball, has three eyes, can be eaten and drunk, and can fall to the ground from over 25 metres high without breaking?

Sounds like a creature from outer space?

No, it's not from outer space, it's a coconut, a fruit that occurs throughout the tropical countries of the world.

The coconut tree is a palm with huge leaves and drooping leaflets. The 'nut' is technically a drupe – a fruit with a hard stone. The outside husk is green (yellow in some species) and smooth; between this husk and the nut is a thick loose layer of coarse brown fibres; the nut is encased in a hard brown shell which has three eyes in one end. Inside the nut shell is a thin brown coat, adhering firmly to the kernel, which is hollow and contains liquid. In the very young fruit, the kernel is soft and there is plenty of liquid. When the fruit ripens, the kernel hardens to a gelatinous texture, which can be spooned out to eat, and the liquid becomes sweet, making a very refreshing and nutritious drink. When the fruit is old, the kernel turns solid and there is very little or no liquid. These old fruits are usually cut open and dried in the sun to separate the meat from the shell.

The meat is then shredded, soaked in hot water, squeezed and strained to make coconut cream or coconut milk, used in curries and many sweet dessert dishes.

Germination or sprouting begins when the fruit is ripe and falls from the tree. The seedling, called an embryo, grows near one of the eyes of the nut. It expands into the inner nut, absorbing nutrients from the 'apple' – a spongy mass developed from the base of the embryo and filling up the seed cavity. It pushes out the plug in the eye and grows through the husk to become the stem as its roots dig into the soil and a new coconut tree begins to grow.

The coconut palm is considered to be the most useful tree in the world – It provides drink, food, fuel, utensils, musical instruments, textile materials, timber, medicines, chemicals, cosmetics – and the list goes on. When intravenous saline solution was in short supply during World War II, doctors reportedly used coconut water as a substitute. Coconut water is a most refreshing drink, but go easy on coconut oil, which is believed to be the most saturated nut oil in the world, unlike the other nut oils which have a high proportion of the 'good' mono-unsaturated fats.

Coconut products include *Copra*, the name for dried coconut meat; *Coconut milk* or *cream*, a thick and sweet liquid produced by pouring boiling water over freshly grated or desiccated coconut, and leaving to cool before squeezing the liquid out through a straining cloth; *Desiccated coconut*, made by shredding and drying the mature white part of the kernel; and *Coconut oil*, which is obtained by separating the coconut milk or cream, the fat is let to rise to the top and the oil is extracted from underneath. *Toddy*, an alcoholic drink, is made from the sap of newly formed flower buds. The tip is cut off the flower stem and the sap collected and fermented. It is then drunk raw or distilled, used as a source of yeast, or allowed to turn into vinegar. Alternately, the sap can be boiled down to make sugar.

Finally, there is a rare product, the *coconut pearl*, which sometimes forms inside a nut, in a way not quite understood scientifically, but probably it is the result of sprouting being arrested by a defective 'eye'. It is claimed as the rarest botanical gem in the world! It has a bluish white lustre and is attributed with many magical and medicinal powers by the native growers.

